Crafting “The Humble Prose of Living”: Rethinking Oral/Written Relations in the Echoes of Spoken Word

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The human being leaves “the fretful cares of everyday life” and enters for a time the realm of creative activity as another world, a world of “inspiration, sweet sounds, and prayers.” And what is the result? Art is too self-confident . . . and too high-flown, for it is in no way bound to answer for life . . . “That’s too exalted for us,” says life . . . “All we’ve got is the humble prose of living.”

—Bakhtin (1990, p. 1)

The art of spoken word has captured youthful spirits all over the country, especially in heterogeneous urban centers. Indeed, the poet Ishmael Reed (2003) comments, “Maybe someone will get a grant to study why black and Hispanic students pack the slam poetry events and write hip-hop verse themselves, but doze off in the missionary classroom [i.e., in classrooms that transmit the academic word to those needing saving] and receive low scores in reading and writing on the missionary’s SAT” (pp. xviii-xix).

The participants in this journal issue suggest that keys to the appeal of spoken word can be found in its very situatedness in, and thus its relevance to, the overlooked, the unheard, and the uncomfortably common place—the daily “mess” (to quote “Dee,” in Fisher, this issue). In naming and articulating the everyday, young people take responsibility for “answering to life” as experienced in their social and cultural surroundings (Bakhtin, 1990). They not only author poems, but they also use their symbolic resources—script, voice, movement, even music—to compose themselves as wide-awake and public participants in their worlds. That is, they become participants in a-literocracy (D.J. Cipher, in Fisher, this issue).

In this essay, I aim to bring this journal issue to a close by opening up for re-consideration a central issue in language arts education, one suggested by the very writing of spoken word: how we as educators think about the
relationship between oral and written language and why that matters for what, how, and who we teach. I begin by tracing the dramatically different views on oral/written relationships that have been articulated in the language arts literature over the last 50 years. In this way, I aim to clarify the fresh perspective offered by the practice of, and scholarship on, spoken word.

I then concentrate on the significance of this vision of oral/written relations for teaching and learning to write. To help me illustrate this significance, I call on some child friends of mine, children who, metaphorically, are the younger brothers and sisters of the students usually on stage in discussions of spoken word. The essay’s star is Tionna, a first grade participant in an ongoing study of child writing in a regulated, that is, test-monitored, central city school.

Tionna and her peers were not formal participants in spoken word forums. Indeed, their school, like most all central city schools, was concerned with the written language “basics” (e.g., written conventions and grammatical usage). Still, the children infused and surrounded all literacy activities with an abundance of talk. When the children’s talking and writing is viewed against the backdrop of the emerging view of oral/written relations, new language arts basics—new foundational skills for the artful use of language—come into focus. Among these basics are an ear for the diversity of everyday voices, a playful manipulation of—flexibility with—those voices, and an alertness to opportunities for performance.

In the end, the language arts practices that we value, and the “basics” we seek to promote, link to our notions of the kinds of publics—the kinds of “we’s”—that should be fostered in and beyond the classroom. If these are to be publics of literocracy, schools should not be places that teach children to be officially deaf and blind to the humanly complex world in which they live.

Speaking Voices as Writing Solutions, Problems, and Resources

Six-year old Tionna is a mid-Michigan child with an ear for voices and a predilection for writing them down. She did so, for example, one day when her peer Elly, tired of the sun on her back, thanked the student teacher,
Miss H., for pulling down the window shades. “We were melting,” Elly said. During writing time, Tionna took Elly’s words, made them her own, and then revoiced them for her class. She wrote:

M.s.s. H pull
down the shass [shades] Elly
said we are melting overe
here we are mellting like
Ice cream on a tree.
We fill [feel] like ice cream
we have chodleita [chocolate] in the
outsid and vnedad [vanilla] in the
inside [Taste us] it will be good
you will sade [say] I won’t [want]
some more of that. (Bracketed words are those Tionna planned and/or read; they are provided for ease of reading.)

The complex oral and written processes through which Tionna wrote and performed this text about Elly, shades, and flavorful ice cream cannot be contained within the brief space of the following overview of oral/written relations. But I can use the overview to illustrate how the practice of spoken word poetry helps interrupt normative assumptions about oral and written language use and, moreover, how it illuminates the artful composing of even the very young. Before so doing, I begin below with two longstanding conceptions of oral/written relations.

“If You Can Say It, You Can Write It”

In the early 70s, when I was teaching young children like Tionna, talk was seen primarily as the raw material for writing. Developmentally speaking, it was the symbolic stuff that children had to learn to put on the page. This was true not only at the level of orthography (i.e., of figuring out the nature of the alphabetic system) but also at the level of ideas. “If you can say it, you can write it” was the mantra of the time for teachers like me. Children had to learn to put their voice (and it was a singular voice) on paper. That is, oral language was the major solution to the problem of learning to write. In Britton’s (1970) words, “writing begins as written down speech” (p. 164).

This view has been critiqued, from both developmental and sociolinguistic angles (e.g., children’s first writing is not necessarily conversational nor is it a representation of speech [Dyson, 1982; Newkirk, 1987]). Still, it remains a useful, if not sufficient, way of envisioning oral/written relations. For example, powerful literacy teachers and scholars have used
speech quite literally as a pedagogical life line to students’ everyday worlds. “First words,” wrote the New Zealand primary teacher Ashton-Warner (1963) must be “organically born from the dynamic life itself” (p.33). Daddy, Mummy, cry, kiss, dance, fight, these are examples of potential “key words,” the spoken almost-poems that are bridges to children’s experienced worlds. In Ashton-Warner’s “organic approach” to child literacy, teachers write down children’s chosen key words; in time and with guidance, children write not only these words but longer texts, as they are drawn into the composing work of putting inner worlds in outer form.

Similarly, in Freire’s (1970) “pedagogy of the oppressed,” teachers use key words—“generative words”—that help adult students reach into and name their experiences and then collaboratively, reflectively, name the societal dynamics that undergird these experiences (e.g., water and land rights, access to legal aid). Talk about generative words helps students read, not just words, but previously indecipherable worlds.

From this perspective, developed by scholar teachers committed to social change, oral language is not only the raw material for writing but, once written, those words give rise to more talk. The spoken word quite literally can contain within it experienced worlds awaiting articulation (cf. Vygotsky, 1962). “Writing,” as Britton (1970) wrote, “takes place afloat upon a sea of talk” (p. 29). But another longstanding view of the relationship between speech and writing separates this oral/written dynamic and pits one channel of communication against the other, as explained below.

“You Can Say It, But Think Twice Before You Write It”

By the end of the seventies, a strong emphasis was on speech, not as a solution, but as a major problem for student writers who write like they talk (Kroll & Vann, 1981). A new mantra arose: “You can say it, but you might need to think twice before you write it,” particularly if “you” speak non-standard vernacular Englishes, like Tionna.

In this country, writing was initially shaped by varied speaking vernaculars. Thus, written language mediated varied ways of speaking, even as it developed normative conventions (Heath, 1981). When public schools became the major site for literacy learning during the 19th century, schooled literacy became differentiated from everyday language (Keller-Cohen, 1993). But, in the 1970s, this view was newly articulated by linguistic research that fostered a dichotomous view of oral and written language themselves.

Studies of what were considered quintessential oral and written texts (i.e., oral conversation and academic prose) portrayed these two channels
of communication as maximally different registers of the language. For example, Chafe (1982) illustrated that, relative to oral conversation, written expository prose is produced more slowly and, given its material tracings, lends itself more easily to revision. Thus, expository written prose tends to be more syntactically complex and compact, and its ideas more elaborated (i.e., less embedded in an ongoing physical context).

Children, particularly those from the cultural mainstream, were portrayed as learning this elaborated or “literate” language orally (e.g., Snow, 1983): The seeds of school success and failure were seen as sown in the home, as parents read to children and, moreover, talked to them in particular ways about books and their own personal narratives. Thus, along with a use of Standard or Edited American English, the qualities associated with written language came to dominate notions of educated language itself. Children from backgrounds deemed “non-mainstream”—particularly those without the bedtime storybook ritual—were at risk of being too “oral,” so to speak.

Categorical boxes, though, tend to deconstruct as their contents become unruly, and this is what happened to the dichotomous categories of oral and written language. For example, literary or performative language—language that draws attention to its aesthetic qualities—seemed to have no place in this dichotomous view. After all, literary language extends linguistic strategies first used in conversation (e.g., rhythmic repetition, reported dialogue, imagery [Tannen, 1989; see also Smitherman, 2000]). Moreover, our most celebrated literary artists have used everyday vernaculars to convey the varied nature of the American experience, and this is true not only of writers for adults but also of writers for the very young (e.g., Lucille Clifton, Eloise Greenleaf, Gary Soto).

In time, the nature of language in use became retheorized as depending, not on some autonomous property of the communication channel, but on the situated nature of its use (Street, 1993). For example, as I have no doubt demonstrated, I can pack clauses with the best of them and, through parentheses, I can elaborate the almost neurotic nuances (or so I fear) of my ideas. But, if I were asked to write a legal brief, I mainly would be writing a brief check (to a lawyer).

“If You Listen, You Can Craft Voices . . . ”

The vision of oral/written relations undergirding research on, and the practice of, spoken word differs from both these views. In this view, speech, or, more accurately, situated voices are rich resources for composing and performing. The mantra is something like, “If you listen, you can craft in writ-
ing what you’ve heard others say and thereby give voice to your own responsive truth.” This vision of oral/written relations is informed in part by sociocultural insights from the 1980s, when ethnographers documented how talk and writing were woven together in complex configurations as people came together in homes, neighborhoods, and churches to produce, use, and talk about texts for some purpose (e.g., Heath, 1983). Oral and written language are dynamically interrelated, as Britton (1970) argued, but the nature of the speaking/writing matrix—and of the “voice” itself—depends on the kind of communicative situation (i.e., the cultural practice) and on the particular social happening (i.e., the ongoing event).

This view, while relatively new in the literature on language education, also has deep roots in our history. Throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, written language was popularly seen as interrelated with oral language and, indeed, with performance. “Gone are the days when sharing books orally and reciting poetry served as a common social activity,” wrote Keller-Cohen (1993, p. 296). But a decade after she wrote those words, the vitality of spoken word suggests otherwise.

To understand spoken word, though, we need more than sociocultural perspectives on the speaking/writing matrix. We need as well Bakhtin’s linguistic philosophy. Bakhtin did not ask questions about oral and written language; he asked how and whose everyday voices—whose utterances—were absorbed into more complex and artful forms of communication, like the novel. Composers, whatever their medium, listen to the conversations going on in their surroundings and then respond with their turn. But their turn, their text, echoes with the voices they have heard.

Heteroglossic texts—those that make use of different kinds of speech, different voices—best capture the dynamics of society itself, thought Bakhtin (1981). He did not feel poems had this novelistic power, but he had not heard poetry like that featured in this volume, poetry crafted from the diversity of American Englishes and languages, themselves situated within richly varied communicative encounters. Indeed, in this issue, all authors problematize the notion that “Bronxonics” (to quote teacher “Joe” in Fisher, this issue) and other non-dominant language varieties have no place in school. Rather, in school, students should develop a “consciousness of differences” (Kinloch, in this issue). That is, students should learn that diverse ways with words have a situated place in and out of school, dependent on their sociopolitically informed strategizing and aesthetic decision-making.

Thus, in Fisher’s studies of participatory communities in and out of the classroom, she does not discuss oral vs. written but oral and written, voices crafted on paper needing oral expression to entertain, teach, and in-
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spire. This is the oral/written relation too in Jocson’s Poetry for the People classes, where, in writing, students could deliberately construct and then revoice versions of themselves speaking up, talking back, and making sense of their gendered, racialized, and youthful worlds. For example, one of her students, Jaime, appropriated the Spanish saying of his mother to voice his anger in a poem that also features his cool-headed, English-speaking self who cooperates with police seemingly on the lookout for trouble (Jocson, 2003).

For Tionna too situated voices, not just “spoken words,” were essential material. In her piece, she echoes, responds to, and anticipates other people’s voices. There is her conversational voice, playing with Elly’s utterance and reaching out to a fictional audience, who will, she says, talk back to her. Like other artful texts, Tionna’s has rhythmic repetitions, vivid images, and engaging dialogue (Tannen, 1989). These draw attention to her use of language itself; that is, they lend themselves to performance by the human voice.

In this new perspective on oral/written relations, then, students themselves listen to the human world around them and use those voices to construct their own voiced response. In listening to each other, they may gain new insight into the potential of language for illuminating “the humble prose of living.” And yet, the current emphasis on mandated testing reinforces a hierarchical view of language and language varieties, as opposed to a situated one, and, moreover, it contributes to the precarious position of the arts and artful performances of any kind in many budget-strapped, central city schools.

Still, even in classrooms under pressure from federal and state mandates and standardized testing, one may hear children displaying the foundations of the artful use of voices in their play on and off the page, and so it was in Tionna’s class.

Listening in on Listening Children: The Project Data Set

Tionna was a participant in an ongoing ethnographic project in an urban elementary school in a mid-sized central city school. The school’s children were primarily from low income homes, but from diverse ethnic heritages, defined as African American, Mexican, White, and American Indian. In the
project, I am studying how children’s voices, steeped in everyday vernaculars and genres, enter into the public of a test-monitored urban classroom. That classroom was guided by a skillful and experienced teacher, Mrs. K., and situated within both accepted “best practices” of writing instruction (e.g., a daily writing period) and the “basics” promoted by new efforts at school accountability (e.g., written conventions and standard usage).

In the classroom, I was not a teacher, grandparent, auntie, or “menateer” (which seems to be a combination of volunteer and mentor, a lovely child invention). I am a middle-aged white woman who has spent many years now easing into a role as an unhelpful but attentive adult friend of small children. The children, one could say, are my preferred performers, although their “artistry” is, at least at first, more aptly described as play.

Over the course of an academic year in Tionna’s classroom, I documented through observation and interviews the children’s responses to school literacy activities and, also, their playful practices during, and beyond, recess. Tionna, who was African American, was one of several focus children chosen for close study because they drew on different linguistic resources and had varying responses to the teaching of the “basics.”

By studying how children interpret and respond to school lessons, I aim to theorize and re-articulate the written language “basics” (i.e., the nature of what must be learned by young children entering into school composing). For example, the official school curriculum, and the ever-looming Iowa Test of Basic Skills, put forward a homogeneous view of language usage. Clearly, then, children with non-dominant “word habits” (Jordan, cited by Kinloch, in this issue) were required to develop a kind of social and linguistic flexibility, even though mastery of correct “grammar,” not flexibility, was the official goal.

Below, I draw on my data set to illustrate qualities of the children’s participation in school that seem foundational, not only to success in the narrowly defined school basics, but in the potentially livelier world of popular arts heralding the children from their churches, their radios, and the older cousins, brothers, and sisters they admire.

On Saying and Writing Voices: Pedagogical Possibilities and Childhood Foundations

The questions undergirding this section are these: What does it sound like if children play with “the humble prose of living”? What pedagogical conditions might support children’s opportunities to stretch, adapt, and consciously use these foundations? And, if children use these everyday voices in
their writing, will their voices be heard in the classroom community or mechanically edited away? In other words, to play with an old mantra, if they write it, can they say it in the classroom public?

Attending to Diverse Voices: Childhood Play and Curricular Respect

To become artists whose medium is the human voice, students need a curricular space that acknowledges, channels, and builds on children's attention to everyday voices. And they need too a school culture of respect for those voices. As already noted, the achievement tests, required textbooks, and curricular objectives in Tionna's school, as in those all over the country, simply forwarded a correct way of writing and, thus, of speaking—of arranging and articulating words. (Interestingly, the mandated “daily oral language activity” involved editing written sentences.)

In contrast, for 6-year-old Tionna, as for young children generally, words and how they were arranged and articulated seemed inextricable aspects of how varied “we’s” talk, that is, of situated voices (e.g., Nelson, 1996). In the unofficial or child-governed world, Tionna’s play captured some of the diverse voices of her everyday life. For example, as she sat and did a craft project, she sang the rhythmically structured informality of an R & B song:

Say my name, say my name / you actin’ kinda shady
ain’t callin’ me baby . . . (based on a song by the group Destiny’s Child).

As she rolled play-doh burgers with her friend Mandisa, she displayed the conversational but polite routines of fast food workers:

Miss, you want a drink to go with that [Number 10 burger]? Any sauce? Yeah? . . . Here you go. Have a nice day.

And she knew something of the discourse of intense “like,” if not love, including its vocabulary, its sad reflections, and vague apologies:

TIONNA: (to her work table companions, as her peer Elly sits and cries softly over Brad’s “dumping” her) [Elly]’s thinking about all the days that she having fun with Brad . . . . That has changed. She want that to go back together. She don’t want that to break up.
BRAD: (quietly to Tionna, who sits right next to him) I still like Elly . . .

TIONNA: Just say um, “Elly, I didn’t mean to say it. I was just in a bad mood.” I say it for you. (louder voice) Elly, Brad say, he was just in a bad mood.

Moreover, Tionna seemed attracted to playful language and strong dialogue in written texts (and in this she reminded me of Jameel, the first-grade “singing scientist” [Dyson, 1993], and of “fake sisters” Denise and Vanessa, the writing “radio stars” [Dyson, 2003]). Indeed, over the course of the academic year, Tionna relied increasingly on explicitly revoicing talk in her own progressively longer, more elaborate texts (which, in the last half of the year, averaged 52 words, almost twice the class average). Mrs. K., in fact, thought Tionna became an unusually strong writer precisely because “there’s lots of talk” in her home.

Tionna wrote about what her dad or her grandma said; she replayed the words of her classmates, like Elly, her close friends, her aunties and cousins, and even her teachers. In one entry, for example, Tionna wrote about a cousin who

all ways copy cat me and I say aret [aren’t] you tier [tired] of copycating me she say no am not that is my favorst [favorite] so plese stop askung [asking] me mame [ma’am] I get tier of that[,] calling me mame so I will call her mame

The assertive back and forth of Tionna’s written dialogue, her explicit feelings and conversational present tense (“she say” and “I say”) contrast the more descriptive, syntactically complex, and formal prose of her texts based on her teacher’s talk. For example:

Yesterday Mrs. K wint to the doctor she had to leav for the rest of the after non because she said her son Kelly had a bump on his arm she said they had to remove it.

Moreover, the fact that she, like all class members, never wrote “ain’t” suggests some sense of language features marked generally as “unofficial” and non-academic.

Tionna’s “ear” certainly seemed supported by Mrs. K.’s own child-mesmerizing and expressive way of telling and reading stories. (Note Tionna’s interest in appropriating her voice.) And, despite the fact that the official curriculum seemed to regard linguistic disrespect as a basic skill, Mrs. K. always responded to the meaning of her children’s talk outside edit-
ing tasks. However, Mrs. K. had no access to any language for talking about
language differences, given her curricular materials, her basic-skills-focused
professional development, and the urgency of children performing well on
the year’s end achievement test (which determined the very survival of the
school). Therefore, Tionna had no access to such knowledge either, outside
her own situating of the classroom within the human and media voices of
her everyday world (e.g., Ain’t it the case that “ain’t” is heard some places
but not others?).

It should be noted, though, that classic writing pedagogy approaches
for young children have also lacked explicit curricular attention to language
variation (and, indeed, to popular literacies). Language diversity, if men-
tioned at all, is a matter of “editing,” not of awareness of differences and of
aesthetic and rhetorical effectiveness. And yet, even very young children
can explicitly acknowledge heritage dialects and languages through, for
example, the study of multicultural literature that contains varied ways with
words and related role play and other forms of drama (Delpit & Dowdy, 2002).

Thus, despite my situating this article in the current political empha-
thesis on the basics, I am not calling for a return to earlier ways of teaching.
Rather, inspired by spoken word, and by the lively speech and writing of
children like Tionna, I am trying to re-imagine the basics for contemporary
children, for whom respect for diverse voices, including new variations of
English all over the globe and diverse languages themselves, will be criti-
cally important, as will a sociopolitical flexibility in language use and an
appreciation of the aesthetic power of language itself to articulate the hu-
man experience.

Hearing Diverse Voices: Public Participation and Performance

In addition to a respect for, and curricular attention to, diverse American
voices (including, of course, Edited American English), there is also a peda-
gogical need to “take it to the mic,” in Jocson’s (in this issue) indigenous
phrase. I am not referring here to places for editorial feedback or evaluative
critique, as vital as those are to crafting, but to places for performance. The
kinds of written texts featured in this issue are not complete until they are
re-infused with the rhythms and melodies of the human voice.

As participants in local child cultures, Tionna and her close friends
were unofficial performers for and with each other throughout the day. In
enacting their childhood cultures, they, like other participants in child cul-
tures, demonstrated the “aesthetics of the ordinary, [which is] a grounded
theory of artistic composition engaged with the fundamental human re-
quirement of self-realization through artistic performance” (McDowell, 1995, p. 62). The children enacted clapping games and stepping rhymes, some particular to the African American tradition (Jones & Hawes, 1972); they performed bits of raps and R & B songs learned from the radio; they did quick Harlem Shakes and boom chicka dances. And, when Mrs. K. performed a particularly funny or otherwise appealing book, they sought out that book for oral performing in pairs or for “playing school” during free choice time.

It was not surprising, then, that the time for “sharing” the day’s writing soon was interpreted by the children as a potential stage for “performing.” Because the children still had to concentrate hard to match their voice to their written words, and to decipher their own spelling, during sharing time they did not manipulate their voices—their tone, pitch, and volume, for example—with the ease with which they did so in the unofficial world. Still, that stage seemed almost desperately important to some children, including Tionna.

Each writing period, Mrs. K asked the children to turn to a new page in their writing books and then she circulated with her date stamp, marking that fresh page. After the children had written, each read their piece aloud—if there was enough time before the “get-ready-to-go-home” bell sounded. If Tionna had anticipated but not gotten to share a text, she was quite vocal about her unhappiness. “Ah man,” she would say. And the next day, she would try to rid that not-yet-read story of its tell-tale stamped date; that date marked the story as stale, as yesterday’s story. She would try to scratch that date out, rip it off, cover it with her arm, or, if need be, copy the whole text onto a fresh new page—all so that she would have another chance to read her “today’s writing” to the class. She wanted time for that story on the stage, and she was willing to manipulate the bureaucracy to get it.

The children’s understanding of, and appreciation for, the dynamics of joint and singular performances in their play—in saying a rhyme “right” (which included right stress and rhythm as well as wording), in slipping into the role of a singer or a media character—this too seemed foundational to learning to compose. The students knew something of making a connection with others through performances. Not only did they offer their own texts during sharing times, they responded to others with laughter, related stories (“One time. . . .”) or dissimilar ones (“Nuh uh!”), as did Mrs. K. herself.

But there was often literally no official time for responses, which were not codified in lists of instructional objectives or curricular benchmarks. Mrs. K. would quite sensibly urge the children to “stop talking” and “listen” if they started to respond, as she needed to keep the flow of child readers
moving. Still, if children found a particular piece interesting or amusing
their talk continued even as the next child waited for their attention. The
talking was indeed “rude,” as Mrs. K. noted. Still, listening seemed tied to
responding, just as Bakhtinian theory suggests. And it is through exactly
that behavior, through situating an offered story among others’ stories, a
presented experience among others’ experiences, that children may begin
to become conscious of different perspectives on, and pleasures in, collective
experiences (Kinloch, this issue). Moreover, it is within just such a re-
sponse-centered discussion that teachers may offer children language that
helps them articulate how texts appeal or not (e.g., because of characters,
theme, plot, language features, visual images, and their own circumstances
and history [Dyson, 1997]).

Again, there was no official district or curricular support for allowing
sharing time a more prominent place in the curriculum, given its potential
as a stage for performance and as a forum for joint reflection on and analy-
sis of how texts work. Further, even in classic writing pedagogy for young
children, students work exclusively toward written publication, as opposed
to performance—of poems, songs, plays, radio shows, and other familiar ways
of using oral and written language to craft voices. But, as I have argued
herein, it is listening to and responding to situated voices that seems central
to child play, to children’s entry into composing, and to the spoken word
poetry of their (metaphoric) big brothers and sisters.

The Poetry of the Everyday

If this were years down the road, perhaps we could have an audio disk to
accompany this journal. We are at a disadvantage, we writers, having only
dull graphics in linear rows with which to convey the multi-media experi-
ences we are discussing. The central idea, though, can perhaps be found by
taking off the headphones, putting down the cell phone, and paying atten-
tion for a while to the voices where one happens to be. Listen stereophoni-
cally, with one ear (so to speak) on the voices and the other on your own
emerging response. Orchestrate those voices so that your own response to
them is embedded in your very composing—craft words in harsh tones or
comedic ones; be ironic or reverent; stretch out the used words or turn them
inside out and stuff them with new meanings. Write this response—this
poem—out, the better to manipulate it, but know that the words will ulti-
mately be played on that most sensitive of instruments, the human voice.

This process sounds hard, but it is linked to how children, cross cul-
turally, learn the use of language itself—they listen, appropriate, revoice.
Moreover, the process has roots in our society’s popular use of literacy, which predated its schooled use, and in its life-and culture-sustaining oral traditions. Indeed, teacher and poet “Mama C” (see Fisher, this issue) teaches just this to her students, so that they know that their hip hop and spoken word are part of an unfolding tide of African American voices that stretch back to slavery times and beyond. These are voices to be respected, she tells her students.

In many contemporary classrooms, linguistic disrespect is a “basic skill,” since students are to master the singular or “proper” way to write and to speak, as opposed to learning to be flexibly astute in language use. Yet, I see no reason that educators should confine their theoretical and pedagogical imagination to the narrow limits of those composing current literacy policies. Nor do I want to be pragmatic about issues of linguistic truth, human respect, and artful imagination. Like the colleagues with whom I share this journal, I want to be determined—like one of “Joe’s” jedi warriors maybe, but, as Maxine Hong Kingston (2003) also says, one whose mission is not to destroy but to further something full of life, like a poem, or a classroom for poetic young souls, like Tionna.

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References


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**Guidelines for the NCTE Promising Researcher Award Competition in Recognition of Bernard O’Donnell**

The 2005 Promising Researcher Award Competition is open to individuals who have completed dissertations, theses, or initial, independent studies after the dissertations between December 1, 2002, and January 31, 2005. Studies entered into competition should be related to the teaching of English or the language arts, e.g., language development, literature, composition, teacher education/professional development, linguistics, etc., and should have employed a recognized research approach, e.g., historical, ethnographic, interpretive, experimental. In recognition of the fact that the field has changed in recent years, the Committee on Research invites entries from a variety of scholarly perspectives.

Manuscripts should be written in format, style, and length appropriate for submission to a research journal such as *Research in the Teaching of English, College Composition and Communication, Curriculum Inquiry, Teaching and Teacher Education*, or *Anthropology and Education*.

Manuscripts should be sent to: NCTE, Promising Researcher Award Competition, 1111 W. Kenyon Road, Urbana, IL 61801-1096; Attention: Felisa Love. Manuscripts must be received on or before **March 1, 2005**. Additional details about manuscript preparation and judging guidelines can be found at [http://www.ncte.org/about/awards/sect/sec/112167.htm](http://www.ncte.org/about/awards/sect/sec/112167.htm).